

REFLECTION
ON OUR
Modern POESY.
AN
ESSAY.

—Fuit hæc Sapientia quondam,
Publica privatis secernere, sacra profanis :
Concubitu probibere vago; dare jura maritis ;
Oppida moliri; leges incidere ligno ;
Sic honor & nomen divinis Vatribus atque
Carminibus venit. — Hor. de Arte Poet.

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REFLECTION

И О И О

Modern Poetry.

Y A S S E

1. The first is the *Principium*, or beginning, which is the point from which the motion starts. It is the point of rest, and is the point of greatest density.

1898

To my Honoured Friend and School-fellow

Mr. A. OWEN.

SIR,

THE way of Dedicating now most in fashion, seems to me to stand in as great need of a Reformation, as does our Poetry. For, as we take nothing to be True and Genuine Poetry, but what is Light, Frothy, and has a wanton Air throughout it; so the generality seem to stand persuaded, That an Epistle Dedicatory loses its End quite, if not stuff'd up with gross and open Flattery, sufficient to call a Blush into any modest Reader's Cheek. But here it is a hard matter to judge, Whether the Impudence of the Author, or the Vanity of the Patron (who believes all true that's said of him) does contribute most to carry on this notorious piece of Folly.

Now (Sir) tho' our Early Friendship, and Intimate Acquaintance was the Reason that prevail'd most upon me in presenting this small Essay to You; yet, to speak truth, there was another Motive too, which made me the more desirous of it, and that was merely upon the account of running counter to the generality of Dedicating Poets, to try if a particular Example might have any small Influence in correcting the Poetical License they take upon such like occasions: For here I was satisfied that I might come off without the least flattering Glance, with one who (tho' young) has Experience enough to understand, that Personal Respect is not to be estimated by the fine Complements and Flourishes of a Fanciful Pen. And for my part, I think if our Poets go on at their old Rate but a little longer, we shall be apt to interpret Epistles of this sort as we do Dreams, by the Contrary.

The great Scandal that Poetry has of late been subject to, together with the respect I always had for it, gave occasion for the following Reflection. For as I was considering how much this Art was esteemed amongst our Forefathers, and how Venerable, nay, almost Sacred, the Name of a Poet was then; Surely (thought I) the Former Honour, and the Present Disgrace the Muses lye under, could never depend on the different Capricio's of two divers Ages, but there must be some more reasonable Ground for this matter, which if once discovered, will give a very fair opportunity of restoring Verse to its Primitive Dignity. Some there are who suspect, That the want of Genius in our Age has

The Epistle Dedicatory.

given Poetry this deadly Wound : But they will soon find their Mistake, if (laying aside the blind Veneration we have for Antiquity) they compare the Ancients and Moderns in any sort of Poetry, excepting the Epic. So that we must seek out for some other Cause more probable than the former. And what others may spy, I know not ; but I think the great Difference lies here, That Poetry is now no longer the Fountain of Wisdom, the School of Virtue ; it is no longer a fit Trainer up of Youth, a Bridler of the Passions and exorbitant Desires : But on the contrary, he is reckoned the Ablest Poet, that is most dextrous at carrying up these Evil Spirits, to disturb the Calm and Quiet of the Soul. And this (if I mistake not) is that which hath deform'd so great a Beauty, and cast an Odium on that most Excellent Art, which was once the Pride of Conquerors, and Envy of Philosophers.

What I have transiently remark'd in the following Verses, will (I doubt not) be dislik'd by many of our Rhiming Sparks ; for take but the Liberty of Writing Immodestly from 'em, and you have quite dismounted them off their Pegasus ; they are quite Tongue-ty'd with them, as Horace says it was in the Reign of the old Comedy, *Chorusque, Turpiter, obtruncit, sublato jure nocendi*.

What I have said against Love upon the Stage, I would not have apprehended so, as if I would have that Passion quite exploded ; for I think it one of the fittest Passions for Poetry, and capable of very great Ornaments ; but then I would have it very nicely and delicately handled ; and what might give the least Offence to the severest Modesty always cast in Shades ; for it is then only that this Passion is not to be allow'd, when it goes beyond its bounds ; and that is, when the Poet's Strokes are too bold, and his Colours too glaring.

I was told (which I my self afterwards found to be true) that a great Part of my Design was already perform'd in the Preface to Prince Arthur. However, that did not trouble me in the least, for I was very glad to see so Eminent an Author of the same Opinion with me ; since I had laid a Rude Draught of my Reflection the last Summer, which I then shew'd several of my Acquaintance. However, the World may think this a Sham, and I am very willing to be thought indebted to so creditable a Person for what I have said.

I shall make no Apology for the Tedioufness of my Epistle, since you are too often guilty of the Contrary Vice in writing to your

Real Friend,

and very Humble Servant.

REFLECTION

ON OUR

Modern Poefy.

IF Poets be (as they pretend) *inspir'd*
 With *Fleat* Divine, and *Sacred Fury* fir'd,
 How comes it then, that each Poetick Piece
 Gives now-a-days Encouragement to *Vice*?

Each *Line* (or else we think it will not do)
 With wanton *Love*, and *Flames* unchaste must glow.
 That scribling *Fop* that would a *Poet* be,
 First bids adieu to all his *Modesty*:
 Invokes not *Phæbus*, but the *God of Wine*;
 Crowns his hot *Temples* with th' inspiring *Vine*:
 The *Glas* (Dull *Sot*!) must make his *Thoughts* sublime;
 For in a *Sober Mood* what Bard can *Rhime*?

But sure Great *Homer* got not thus a *Name*,
 Nor Lofty *Maro* his *Eternal Fame*,
 Their *Muses* chaste as *Vestal Virgins* were,
 Stately, not *Proud*; *Reserv'd*, but not *Severe*.

The Flame that thro' their Works so bright does shine,
 Was surely kindled by a Breath Divine,
 No *Cupid's Puff*, nor *Frenzy* caus'd by Wine.
 But that our Follies we at large may see,
 Let's closer view our *Modern Poesy*.

What place so much debauch'd as is our *Stage*,
 Which next the *Pulpit*, should correct the Age?
 What anciently *Devotion* did begin,
 We have converted to the use of *Sin*;
 And on our Theatres we daily see
Vice triumph o'er dejected *Honesty*.

But happy *Athen*! whose more splendid *Stage*
 Was moraliz'd by *Sophocles* wise *Rage*:
 Who e're he did pretend to *Poetry*,
 Search'd the grave *Preccepts* of *Philosophy*;
 Hence 'twas he taught but what he learnt before,
 And practis'd those sound Rules his Writings bore:
 He doubly charm'd his *Modest* Audience,
 By good Example, and wise Eloquence.
Philosophers far short in teaching came,
 Their Naked *Virtues* maimed were and lame.
 The *Pearl* they represented to the View
 Unpolish'd, as It naturally grew.
 But *Poets* put a *Gloss* on't, made it shine,
 Then 'twas embrac'd as somewhat more *Divine*.
 And what the *People* thought too Hard before,
 Sits Easy now, and is with Pleasure bore.

And now what weak Excuse, what vain Pretence,
 Can *Christian Poets* bring in their Defence?

Shall

Shall *Heathens* teach by *Nature's Glow-worm Light*;
 What they neglect when *Faith* directs their *Sight*?
 Or are our *Palates* vitiated, and we
 Can relish nought but *Vice* in *Poetry*?
 Must They indulge the *Ill*, and sooth our *Fate*,
 Or else prevent it e're it be too late?
 If We are led away by strong *Desire*,
 Must They add *Fuel* to the raging *Fire*?
 Not so did *Orpheus*; but with tuneful *Voice*,
 Taught *Salvage Men* that follow'd *Nature's Choice*,
 That wildly stray'd in shrubby *Brakes* all day,
 And herded with the common *Beasts* of *Prey*;
 E'en These he taught their *Passions* to subdue,
 Through *Error's Maze* to follow *Reason's Clue*,
 Their *Mossy Caves* and *Grotto's* to forsake,
 And fitter *Dwellings* for themselves to make;
 And that in *Learning Grace* did so aspire,
 Was wholly owing to his *Sacred Lyre*.

Then let some *Champion* for the *Muses* rise,
 Who dares be obstinately *Good*, and *Wise*;
 Let him but turn the *Scream* of *Hellcon*,
 And make It in its proper *Channel* run.
 He needs not fear his *Bayes* shall wither'd lye,
 Or that We shall despise his *Poetry*;
 For *Virtue*, when well dress'd in *Comely Grace*,
 Has surely *Charms* so lovely in her *Face*,
 We all should *Vice* forsake, and only *Her* embrace.

But He must then take a *peculiar* care,
 No *Wanton Scenes* have in his *Poem* share:

A *Plot* and *Moral* let him chuse, that's free
 From all Allays of fulsome *Ribaldry*,
 Which in our *Modern Plays* too oft we see.
 Let not *Immodest Love* come in his Rhimes;
 Which to excuse, our Poets oftentimes
 Reply, They bring such Objects into view,
 To make us loathe those Passions we pursue.
 But this is False; They always move *Desire*,
 Fan by degrees in us *Unlawful Fire*:
 For here the Poet's Warm Expressions move
 Th' *Unthinking Herd* such Passions to approve.
 Then let 'em be with Care remov'd from sight;
 If we'll be free, we must forget 'em quite.

The Wiser Ancients did this Fault decline,
 And made their *Tragedies* more *Masculine*.
 Each nervous Scene some *Manlike Virtue* taught;
 Untainted with the least *Immodest Thought*.
 Their *Heroes* were more *Steady*, and fit for Wars,
 Scorn'd whining *Love*, and *Jealousy's* fond Jars:
 But *Ours*, more fit for *Womans* Childish Arms,
 Are *Womens* Fools, and *Captives* to their Charms.
 The Stage, which *Terror* should with *Pity* move,
 With us is wholly taken up in *Love*.
 In this (as well as other Follies) we
 Too much affect the *Gallick Levity*:
 Thence our *Romantick Heroes* first we drew,
 Unlike our *Arthur*, and our *William* too.
 In vain it is, that *Heav'n's Wife* Providence
 Has by a Sea divided us from *France*,

If still their *Fopperies* we Imitate,
 And their vain Customs to our *Isle* Translate:
 We want not *Genius* for the *Baskin* Muse,
 Would *Britain* but all *Foreign* Aids refuse;
 Nor of our *Language* need we to complain;
 'Tis Pompous, Bold, and fits the Tragick Strain.

Our Poets too that have wrote Comedy,
 Have *Wit* enough, but fail in *Modesty*:
 They still forget the *End* for which they write,
 And mind not *Profit*, so they can *Delight*.
 But he that wears the *Sack*, should carefully
 Purge all his *Writings* from *Obscenity*:
 And though the *Age's Humour* he expose,
 Yet no *Unseemly* things should he disclose.
 His Plays should be a *Glass*, where All might see
 How to correct their own *Deformity*.
Terence in this might justly claim the *Bayes*,
 Whose Lively Draughts succeeding Ages praise:
 By Him was taught upon the *Roman* Stage,
 The Duties proper to each *State* and *Age*.
 But here with us, in a whole Comedy
 One *Virtuous Character* you cannot see:
 Rather than want for *Vice*, we chuse to draw
 Strange Monsters, contrary to *Nature's Law*!
 True *Innocence* the Poet ridicules,
 And *Honesty* reserves for none but *Fools*.
 His *Gentleman* he makes a Wondrous Sage,
 That's deeply read in *Vices* of the *Age*:
 His *Mistress* and his *Cloaths* employ his Care;
 Of all his Thoughts his *Countrey* claims no share!

The *Damsel* too, e'er Fifteen Years expire,
 Is all o'er Love, and Wanton with Desire ;
 Then strait all Filial Duty's laid aside,
 And nought will please her, but the Name of *Bride* :
 Which once obtain'd, does soon uneasie prove,
 And still she trafficks in Forbidden Love ,
 Her Husband's *Kisses* lose their wonted Taste,
 And stollen Pleasures always Relish best.
 These *Characters* with Wit and Language joyn'd,
 Must needs Instruct a Youthful Reader's Mind !

These Ills, tho' great, yet are but light to Crimes,
 Whose Horror shall amaze succeeding Times !
 See now the Poet's *Bold* in Mischief grown,
 And turns to Ridicule the *Sacred Gown* !
 The Grave *Divine* a Laughing-stock he makes,
 And the firm Basis of Religion shakes :
 High Heav'n's *Embassador* within the Scene
 Lays by his awful and becoming Mien,
 And takes upon him there (O Monstrous sight !)
 To play the *Pimp*, or Canting *Hypocrite*.
 Happy the Heathens ! whose Impiety
 Ne'er mounted yet to such a high degree.
 Due Reverence to their Priests was always shown,
 And Distance kept from the *Mysterious Gown*.
Calchas was Fear'd and Honour'd as a God,
 The *Grecian Army* still Obey'd his Nod.
 But hear, O hear ! how mighty was the Hand
 Of *Moses*, and how powerful the *Wand*,
 That wrought such Wonders in Proud *Pharaoh's Land* !

Revolve th' *amazing* History, and learn
The Dignity of *Priesthood* to discern.

Satyr, which was a wholesome Remedy,
Prescrib'd to cure a People's Malady,
When prudently apply'd doth Good produce;
But as all *Goods* are subject to abuse,
So this of Late no Publick Cure intends;
But only serves to black Malicious ends.
We dip our Pens in *Gall* when e'er we Write,
And all our *Inspiration* is but *Spite*.
But *Horace*, free from Prejudice and Rage,
With *Honey* did the smarting *Sting* assuage:
His *Satyr* grinn'd not as it bit, but *Smil'd*,
Both Cur'd the Reader, and his Care beguil'd.
Had *Dryden* never Writ, then *Britain* still
Had with *Despair* admir'd the *Roman Skill*:
But now, by his Example taught, we know,
That *Finest Satyr* in our Soil will grow.

Our Songs and Little Poems, for most part,
Have much degraded the Poetick Art.
On Trifling Subjects all our Wit we drain;
Which little Credit to the Writer gain.
Turn over e'ery Late *Miscellany*,
You hardly can a Modest Copy see.
Broad Words, and fulsome Thoughts we now admit,
And praise the Nauseous Author for a *Wit*.
But sure by Men of *Sense* and *Quality*,
The Wretch is Pity'd for his Ribaldry;
And here the Petty *Scribler's* Blasted Bays
Is propt but by the silly *Vulgar's* Praise.

Were

Were I design'd by Kinder Destiny
 To Court a *Muse*, and follow *Poetry*;
 My early care should be to raise a Fence
 To guard All-Pure my Native *Innocence*;
 My Infant *Genius* should strict *Virtue* learn,
 And *Modesty* should be its great Concern;
 Nor Popular Applause, nor hopes of Gain,
 Th' unspotted Brightness of the *Pearl* should stain.
 For Reputation, if it once be lost,
 Can never be regain'd by any Cost;
 'Tis Bright like Chrystal, but 'tis Brittle too,
 Easie to Crack, but hard for to Repair.
 Then closely would I watch m' untainted *Muse*,
 That She no *Mereprorious Arts* should use;
 No Unbecoming Words, nor Wanton sound,
 The Niceness of her *Virgin Ear* shou'd wound.
 So shou'd my Writings with the *Enaid* strive,
 And my Chaste Verse to endless Ages live;
 Whilst all my Readers say, Lo! This is *He*,
 That from long Bondage set the *Muses* Free.

FINIS

